

By MARK LESLIE

ROCHESTER, N.Y. — June 1994. The month stands out in bold neon, blinking in the memories of golf course superintendents across the country. It marked the end of the Era of Mercury, and thus the threshold of the Time of Troubles — troubles they knew not of... then.

"Mercury was one of the fungicides we used for things like snow mold control. But I think it kept a lot of things in check," said Bob Feindt, superintendent at Country Club of Rochester. "You never saw many of these

strange patch diseases that you see today: like root pythium. The cadmiums, heavy metals, knocked out a lot of things."

Mercury had been outlawed for several years in some states — basically those with large bodies of water — but remained legal in most. Then the federal Environmental Protection Agency banned it nationwide last

June. Now, superintendents in states like New York, who for years had to deal with turfgrass problems without mercury, have the expertise share with newcomers concerning this ban.

A major nemesis on golf courses since the mercury prohibition is moss on greens. "You're seeing moss more and more," Feindt said. "We're cre-

ating ideal conditions for it. We cut the grass extremely low and don't feed it as heavily. So we weaken the turf and give less competition to the moss.

"Greens that are shaded, or with excessive moisture, encourage moss, also."

Dr. Noel Jackson of the University of Rhode Island promotes an easy solution: raise the cutting

heights and increase fertilization.

"Iron is a temporary expedient," Jackson said. "It is a very effective desiccant of mosses. But the point is, it's effective but not persistent."

But clubs like CC of Rochester, Oak Hill, Oakmont (in Pennsylvania) and thousands of others can't do that. Their members or clientele demand speed on their putting surfaces.

The solution for Feindt and others has been liquid iron. "We tried a potassium salt and it didn't work as well as iron," Feindt said.

"If the green will take a 100-percent [iron] concentrate, you can treat it that way. Or you can dilute it to a 50-50 solution," Feindt said. "We put it in liquid form in a Windex bottle and spray it on the moss, or apply it with a paint brush. It literally burns out the moss.

"Leave it for a week. It turns black. Then put a plug of fresh grass in. Some guys dig it out. We have a 2-inch plugger."

While moss can appear any time of year, Feindt said he attacks it "more aggressively in the fall — when it's cooler. I take the iron right out of the bottle and hit that spot. You will get more injury to the turf in the hot weather. In October-November you will get some injury but not like in July-August when the plant is under stress. Plus, in the fall it has the winter months to heal over."

Feindt suggested each superintendent "experiment in their own situation, trying different concentrations [of iron] to get rid of the moss. Nothing is black and white in this industry."

Like with any pesticide or fertilizer, superintendents should conduct the tests on their turf nurseries when possible, before applying it on the course.

Terry Buchen, superintendent at Double Eagle in Galena, Ohio, said he uses frequent, light applications of iron instead of heavy — ensuring, also, there is no nitrogen in the product. His mix: 10 ounces of iron (a 21-percent water-soluble granule) per 1,000 square feet.

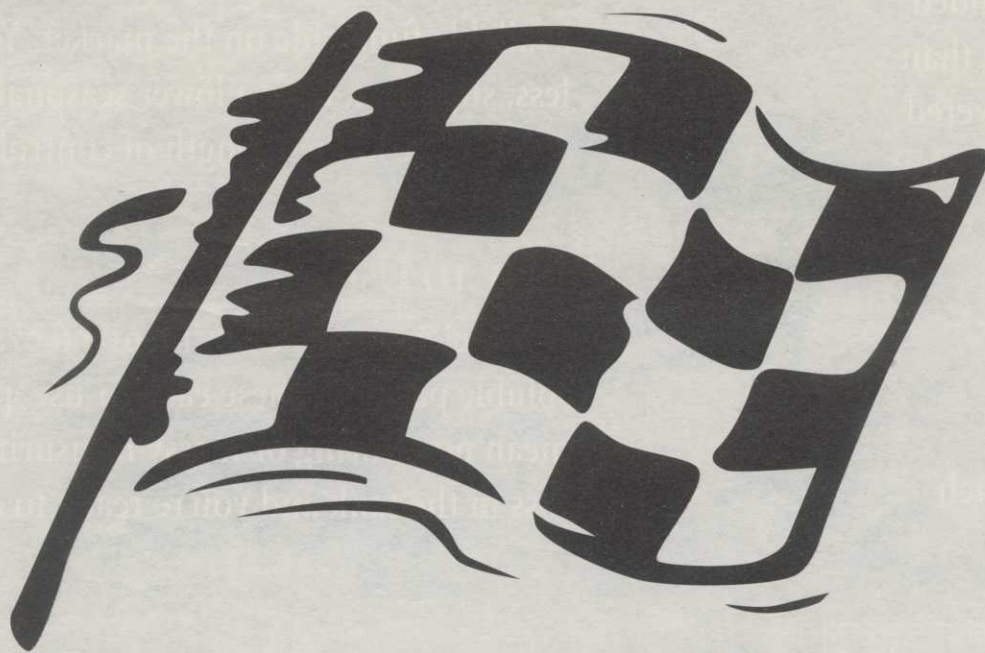
The battle, Jackson said, will never be won permanently with the iron solution because it does not kill the moss spores and that is how moss spreads. Nor do other commercial products, namely pesticidal soaps — potassium salts of fatty acids.

None of these treatments address the basic conditions leading to moss growth. "Those conditions are anything but instrumental in reducing the growth of the grass," he said. "The only thing that conferred long-term protection was mercury."

How much higher would Jackson have superintendents cut the grass? "You can't generalize," he said. "Some courses can mow at 1/8 inch and get away with it. Others, where the surface is undulating, get scalped when you mow even at 5/16 inch."

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